

THE MANAGER

GENERATION NEXT

Four young people talk about their careers, learning to be managers and their future plans

Career roundtable

THE PATH

What education and work experiences were most helpful to you in your dairy career?

Jon Beller: I was always involved in the farm growing up and knew I would want to farm with my parents, Glenn and Emily. I attended SUNY Cobleskill, earning an associate's degree in dairy science. It was a good opportunity to develop independence and meet people.

When I graduated, I wanted experience on a well-managed, progressive dairy so I could learn what makes it successful. I wanted a position that was challenging and had responsibility.

While working at a dairy in central New York, I developed skills in herd management and had the opportunity to work with Hispanic employees.

I knew I wanted more responsibility and the ability to make my own decisions, which I felt I could have at home. Plus, I expected I could have a good working relationship with my parents. To create opportunities for me, they'd made changes such as going from a tiestall facility to a freestall with a milking parlor.

Nate Durfee: Growing up, my focus was to be part of the home dairy. I applied and was accepted at Cornell, majoring in dairy management with a focus on business. I never lost the focus to come back home and graduated in three years in 2005.

At Cornell, some of the most important experiences were from being involved with the Farm Credit Fellows and the Dairy Fellows programs. Visiting different farms to see how things were done provided a basis for getting involved with the business side of the dairy.

Jeff Post: I attended SUNY Cobleskill for two years before transferring to Cornell. My biggest regret might be that I didn't go to Cornell all four years. It offered so many opportunities through programs like Farm Credit Fellows and Dairy Fellows, internships and visits to other parts of the country.

I had an internship on a 1,500-cow dairy in Idaho. After graduation I was hired as a herdsman for Lamb Farms in Oakfield. I couldn't ask for anything more right out of college than to work for a progressive 3,000-cow dairy. I quickly found myself working with reproduction, and I also focused on the fresh cow program.

I left there to become the manager of a 600-cow dairy in western New York. That gave me two years

of experience running a dairy pretty much on my own. I was a little involved in the financial management also.

These jobs taught me about how to manage employees and how to treat people with respect. I was able to watch and observe management strategies. I was also able to hone my cow skills.

I hadn't thought about coming home. But then my dad, Dan, and Uncle John asked me. My Aunt Laurie (Post) has responsibilities with the cows and maintains our robotic milking equipment.

I'm the fifth generation, and I wanted to work with my dad and family. Our biggest challenge was to figure out how to add a new member to a well-run business.

Lynne Richardson: I didn't grow up on a dairy but always wanted to be a veterinarian. In high school in Medina I was involved in 4-H and FFA. My teacher got me involved with beef cattle, then dairy. I found I loved cows.

After getting to college, I realized I didn't like all the science course work required to become a veterinarian. I earned a vet tech degree at SUNY Delhi before going to SUNY Cobleskill for a year to get some dairy science experience. Then I transferred to Cornell as a junior in the dairy science program.

I interned as a vet tech for a couple years while in college and also had an internship on a large dairy. My educational experiences and internships made me realize that people in herdsman positions can do a lot of vet-related work.

While at Cornell, I had come to Willet Dairy on a field trip and was impressed with the management style the owner, Dennis Eldred, portrayed. So I chose the dairy as my first job. I really liked the challenge of a large dairy and saw there were lots of opportunities here.

THE CAREER

What are your job responsibilities?

Beller: I'm responsible for herd health, fresh

FYI

■ The following PRO-DAIRY specialists contributed to this article: Deborah Grusenmeyer and Jason Karszes. Frans Vokey, an Extension educator based in Lowville, N.Y., and Eleanor Jacobs, an agricultural journalist, also contributed.

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cows and calves. I give shots, do breeding and purchase semen. I handle day-to-day dairy operations, including supervising dairy employees. Plus, I'm involved in strategic decision-making with my parents.

Durfee: I spent the first year and a half back home milking the night shift, mixing feed and helping out in the crop program. After the first six months, I took on the responsibility of working with the nutritionist on rations.

One reason I was so focused on returning home was the potential to work with my parents, Steve and Marylou, and to pursue opportunities to grow the business. When I came home, my parents accelerated changes they had been considering. Working as a team, we remodeled facilities and undertook new construction.

Currently, I'm responsible for nutrition, herd records and reproduction, working alongside key employees. My father and I are co-managers, and I'm in an ownership position.

My parents and I work together on business record keeping and analysis, participating in both the Farm Credit Large Herd Consulting Project and the Dairy Farm Business Summary and Analysis Program.

Post: When I came home, no one was fully responsible full time for the cows. My family knew I'd manage anything with four legs, which is what I do.

Richardson: I've been at Willet Dairy for 14 years and have been trained in all areas of dairy herd management. Currently, I oversee the day-to-day activities for 4,600 cows and heifers and the people who work with them. I review herd records, schedule tasks for people and animals, keep things organized and handle herd health.

THE SKILLS

What skills and traits are important for success in your dairy management career?

Beller: You need the drive to be excellent. You need excellent communication skills in order to get your point across without ticking people off. You must be able to get the work done, change if necessary and continue moving forward through the change.

Durfee: To earn the respect of my parents and the right to make decision, I focus on these things:

- Research changes so I can explain the reasons behind what I think we should do. This helps me avoid off-the-cuff decisions.
- Ask well thought-out questions.
- Work the hours, including the night shift, alongside my parents and employees.

We try to improve everything we do. Through benchmarking and talking with other farmers, we know what we're good at and where we could improve.

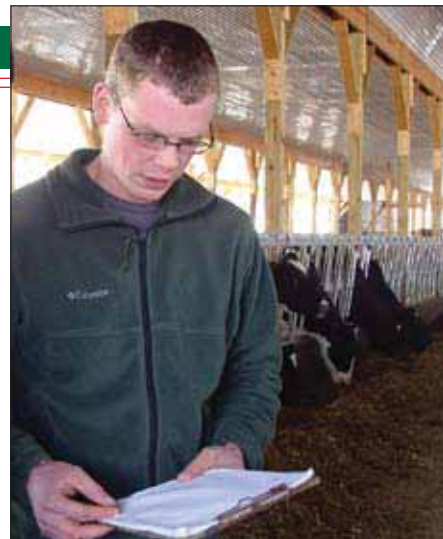
Post: Attention to details is important. You need cow skills, which I learned working on a large dairy. You learn a lot from the older generation, such as a work ethic. You need communication skills.

Be patient. When I came back to the farm three years ago, it took time to figure out where I fit. We all had to make adjustments to the way we worked together. We had to learn to appreciate each other's strengths.

Richardson: Being able to work with lots of different personalities is a key. You have to be flexible with people and listen to their ideas. Technical skills can be important, but it's more the work ethic and people skills.

You have to earn people's respect and prove you can do the job. You

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Jon Beller, 28
Partner, Beller Farms
LLC
Carthage, N.Y.
Number of cows: 350



Nate Durfee, 27
Partner, Tuscarora
Dairy LLC
Chittenango, N.Y.
Number of cows: 480



Jeff Post, 31
Partner, Post Dairy
Farm LLC
Oakfield, N.Y.
Number of cows: 380



Lynne Richardson, 36
Herd manager, Willet
Dairy LLC
Locke, N.Y.
Number of cows: 4,600

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can't ask someone to do something you haven't done. I learn a lot by accepting challenges and working through them.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

What can you tell other young people about succeeding as a dairy manager?

Beller: Get off your own farm and work for someone else before coming home. When you do come back home, make sure there is an agreed-upon plan. What will your role and responsibilities be? Some other tips are:

- Earn the respect of employees and owners. Sometime you need to shut up and realize your ideas might not be best.
- Push hard in areas you're responsible for but yield in other areas.
- Work with a team of advisers to get feedback and build support for your ideas.
- After adequate thought and input from others, make decisions and move forward. Give your decision time but be prepared to change course if needed.

Durfee: Be willing to work your way up the ladder to having responsibility for making decisions. This means doing all the jobs from night milking to feeding and crop work.

Change is constant so you can never stop learning. If you do, you'll be left in the dust.

Post: I would say that not coming home to work right after college was the best decision that I could have made for my career. When you come out of Cornell, you think you know everything. You may know a lot but not how to apply it. You've got to know you don't know everything. Continually educate yourself; let yourself be challenged.

Richardson: You need to know where you are to know if you're going forwards or backwards in the day-to-day management and to establish goals. Being organized and good with such management tools as Dairy Comp are important.

THE NETWORK

What do you do to stay in touch with others in the industry?

Beller: I'm in a young producers' discussion group with about 12 people. We meet a few times a year, but I communicate regularly with a couple of the members.

To improve my skills to manage the dairy herd, employees and finance, I attend six to eight educational meetings a year. I look for

ones that are relevant and challenging. Lately I've been a speaker at several of them

I'm in regular contact with farm advisers – veterinarian, nutritionist, Extension – and seek input on management decisions.

Durfee: Graduating in three years and returning home right away, I limited my opportunities to participate in some Cornell programs, such as spending a semester abroad. But I've never stopped learning and developing additional experiences. I read as many magazines as I can and use this information as a basis for questions and discussions with classmates from Cornell, agri-service providers, consultants and the dairy advisory team that works with us.

I chair the Madison County Farm Bureau Young Farmer and Rancher committee and I'm on the county's Agricultural Economic Development Committee.

Post: I can network with my AGR fraternity brothers and Dairy Fellows. I'm also in a Dairy Profit Discussion group that meets twice a year. We get together for two days and talk to each other about everything. I'm also vice president of Genesee County Farm Bureau.

Richardson: I really enjoy my time at home with my family which includes two children. I work at balancing family and work.

I have opportunities to participate in workshops, webinar trainings and educational programs. I read a lot, including dairy magazines and research reports on-line. I consult with dairy industry groups like QMPS (Quality Milk Production Services), veterinarians and nutritionists.

GROWTH MODE

What's your plan for the future?

Beller: Long term, I'd like to have more management responsibility. I have a fear of getting bored and expect I'll someday oversee others doing many of the things I do now.

Durfee: With all the changes that occurred since I've come home, and more changes planned, I'm still excited about the opportunity to be on my home farm. We're planning to build a parlor this spring and move toward a 500-cow herd.

Post: Our goal is to have eight robots, up from our current four robots, milking the entire herd. We may expand to about 500 cows. Our older milking parlor where we now milk about 130 of our cows – the other approximately 220 are in the six-row barn with robots – has only so much left to give back to us.

Richardson: I'm really happy where I am and enjoy what I do at Willet Dairy. □